DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 856 PS 028 528

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TITLE Continuity and Purpose in the Design of Meaningful Project Work.
ISSN ISSN-1524-5039
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 10p.; In: ECRP, Volume 2, Number 1; see PS 028 521.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v2n1/print/mcaninch.html.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
JOURNAL CIT Early Childhood Research & Practice; v2 n1 Spr 2000
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Design; Educational Philosophy; *Experiential Learning; Learning Theories; Primary Education; Progressive Education; *Student Projects; Teaching Methods; *Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Dewey (John); *Project Approach (Katz and Chard)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two pitfalls in designing project work. The first is a tendency to design projects with little emphasis on how the subject matter might connect to future studies. The second involves processes and goals of project work: all too often the processes proposed for project work serve goals that are nonexistent, weak, or unrelated to one another; or if strong goals exist, they are served by mundane processes. Because the philosophical foundations of project work reside in progressive education, and in particular in the work of Dewey, this paper focuses on the insights his conception of curriculum has for these pitfalls. In the first section of the paper, Dewey's principle of continuity is examined in relation to the first pitfall and the treatment of subject matter in project work. In the remainder of the paper, goals and processes are considered in light of Dewey's discussion of the concept of purpose. Dewey's theoretical analysis of progressive education suggests that subject matter content, processes, and products are all vital to intelligent activity. The paper also points to the fundamental role that the philosophical foundations of education play in the development of curriculum for young children and the difficulty of implementing progressive pedagogy. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/LPP)

ECRP
EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH & PRACTICE

Volume 2, Number 1

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Continuity and Purpose in the Design of Meaningful Project Work

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Abstract

This paper discusses two pitfalls in designing project work. The first is a tendency to design projects with little emphasis on how the subject matter might connect to future studies. The second involves processes and goals of project work: all too often the processes proposed for project work serve goals that are nonexistent, weak, or unrelated to one another; or if strong goals exist, they are served by mundane processes. Because the philosophical foundations of project work reside in progressive education, and in particular in the work of Dewey, this paper focuses on the insights his conception of curriculum has for these pitfalls. In the first section of this paper, Dewey's principle of continuity is examined in relation to the first pitfall and the treatment of subject matter in project work. In the remainder of this paper, goals and processes are considered in light of Dewey's discussion of the concept of purpose. The paper notes that Dewey's theoretical analysis of progressive education suggests that subject matter content, processes, and products are all vital to intelligent activity. The paper also points to the fundamental role that the philosophical foundations of education play in the development of curriculum for young children and the difficulty of implementing progressive pedagogy.

Introduction

The impetus for this paper is my frustration in helping preservice teacher candidates develop sound plans for project work for the early primary grades. My experience has been that the pitfalls involved in designing project work are at least twofold. First, preservice teacher candidates tend to design projects as islands unto themselves, with little emphasis on how the subject matter might connect to future

studies. For example, a project on "China," followed by a project on "Australia," will contain few concepts and understandings connecting the two subjects. If there are concepts that relate one study to the next or subsume both topics, they are all too often implicit, rather than explicit. Thus, while the customs or language particular to each country may be examined as part of project work, children are not helped to think in terms of overarching concepts such as "culture." The consequence is a weakening of the educational value of the project. The second pitfall has to do with the processes and goals of project work. All too often, the processes that preservice teacher candidates propose for project work serve goals that are nonexistent, weak, unrelated to one another, or unclarified. On the other hand, strong goals are frequently served by mundane processes. Here, too, opportunities for learning may be lost. As Katz has pointed out, projects require good content and processes in the service of solid intellectual goals (L. G. Katz, personal communication, December 10, 1999).

Because the philosophical foundations of project work reside in progressive education, and in particular in the work of Dewey (1938), this paper focuses on the insights his conception of curriculum has for these pitfalls. In the first section of this paper, Dewey's principle of continuity is examined in relation to the first pitfall and the treatment of subject matter in project work. In the remainder of this paper, goals and processes are considered in light of Dewey's discussion of the concept of purpose. For the progressives who originally advocated project work, the alienation and intellectual stagnation of 19th-century schooling was to be remedied by the "whole-hearted purposeful activity" of project work (Kilpatrick, 1925, p. 349). Dewey's effort to formulate the principles by which a child-centered and experientially based curriculum can be designed and evaluated makes clear that projects are not merely a pedagogical reform, but more fundamentally they are tied to the cultivation of the kind of intellectual dispositions required of citizens in a democracy. These ideas are examined more fully below, turning first to the "principle of continuity" and its implications for a project curriculum.

The Principle of Continuity and Project Design

As noted above, one of the pitfalls of project work is that all too often successive projects have little explicit relationship to one another. Even when projects are ostensibly closely related to each other, as a study of Australia and China might be, little overt connection exists between them. Are there ways in which the subject matter within projects could be organized to maximize the opportunity for learning? How can project work be made more educative? In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) asserted that progressive pedagogy, such as the project curriculum, should differ from traditional education in two ways. First, unlike traditional schooling that intentionally ruptured the connection between everyday experience and school experience, Dewey argued for schooling based on phenomena familiar to the children. Curriculum experiences must "at the outset fall within the scope of ordinary life-experience" (p. 87). Dewey's Lab School at the University of Chicago manifested this idea by focusing on "occupations," those activities most familiar to young children, such as cooking. Second, Dewey argued that these experiences form a basis for ever-widening and richer mastery of subject matter. He wrote, "experiences in order to be educative must lead out into an expanding world of subject-matter, a subject-matter of facts or information and of ideas" (p. 111).

This "leading out" process from firsthand experience to an ever-widening and reflective understanding of subject matter relies on what Dewey called the principle of continuity of educative experience. The principle of continuity posits that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 27). Dewey pointed out that the principle of continuity operates regardless of the quality of the experience: "there is *some* kind of continuity in every case" (pp. 27- 28). Within the traditional school curriculum of the 19th

century, endless recitations and harsh punishments produced in many children a disdain for further academic studies, a dislike so vehement that some children actually preferred the rigors of factory work to those of the schoolhouse. Here the principle of continuity worked to extinguish attitudes and dispositions for further intellectual growth. Thus, the traditional school was very often *miseducative.* Dewey wrote, "There is no paradox in the fact that the principle of the continuity of experience may operate so as to leave a person arrested on a low plane of development, in a way which limits later capacity for growth" (p. 31). In other words, the cumulative impact of negative experiences in school may curtail altogether a desire for further study. In contrast, the aim of teachers in a progressive curriculum is to exploit the principle of continuity such that capacities are opened up and strengthened for yet more growth:

> It thus becomes the office of the educator to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience. He must constantly regard what is already won as not a fixed possession but as an agency and instrumentality for opening new fields which make new demands upon existing powers of observation and of intelligent use of memory. Connectedness in growth must be his constant watchword. (Dewey, 1938, p. 90)

So organically connected should curriculum activities be that Dewey referred to the structure of the curriculum as a continuous spiral, relying on current activities as a "moving force" toward new and more rigorous inquiries and interests. New facts and understandings should be "carried over" as an agency to the next experience, and so on.

The pitfall of designing sequential projects that do not "carry over" ideas and understandings from one project to the next is the failure to exploit the principle of continuity in the cause of pupil learning. In this case, rather than a continuous spiral, the curriculum is more like a parade of discrete activities. Regardless of how interesting and engaging individual projects might be, they nonetheless ultimately lack the organic connection Dewey saw as vital for pupil growth. If connectedness is to be the watchword in the design of projects, what are some ways in which it might be facilitated?

One idea is that when teachers are faced with the task of designing a project curriculum, they think more in terms of project themes rather than topics. In the literature on integrated curriculum in general, rarely is this distinction made, and the two terms are used most frequently as synonyms. It is useful, however, to try to distinguish between them. While a topic generally consists of a fairly concrete concept such as "simple machines," "Halloween," or "the supermarket," a theme tends to subsume its subject matter with a statement of a principle, relationship, problem, or a more abstract concept that can be applied to more than one subject matter area. Rather than the topic of simple machines, for example, a project might employ the theme, "technology helps us do our work." The idea is that connections can be more readily drawn between the lever, pulley, and the computer using the latter theme. The theme of "the life cycle" can link the study of baby chicks to the planting of seeds. The more general concept or principle could then subsume other studies, and connections could be drawn between them. It is far less clear how "topics" might perform this leading out or carrying over function, since they typically name concrete concepts. "Tornadoes," "the Civil War," "Kansas City," "the oceans," and "fossils," for example, all seem to lack as much potential for the kind of spiraling Dewey sought, although they might be of high interest and provide the basis for engaging activities.

The idea of thematic, rather than topical, projects is related to Raths's (1971) ideas about the criteria of worthwhile curriculum activities. Drawing on the work of Peters (1967), he asserted that one criterion of a worthwhile activity is that the subject matter under study "must be seen by both teachers and students as illustrative of important understandings, intellectual processes and/or problems" (p. 133). Closely related to the idea of using subject matter as an agency, Raths (1971) asserted that this criterion

signifies that no subject matter would be studied for its sake alone, but to illustrate some larger idea:

> No class would deal with the Pilgrims simply to learn about the Pilgrims. Instead, the Pilgrims would be studied to illustrate, for instance, ideas of religious freedom. A class in science would not study the amoeba for the sake of learning about pseudopoda, but would be using the study of amoeba to illuminate ideas about evolution. (p. 133)

Again, simple machines would not be examined only for the sake of learning about simple machines, but they would be studied because they illustrate some important understanding about technology. Under study, then, are not just facts but the themes that subsume them; these are the ideas that create the springboard for new studies.

The definition of theme advanced here is also related to Herrick's discussion of organizing centers, or the foci of curriculum, possessing the quality of "mobility." An organizing center with mobility is one that has the capacity "to move in time, in space, in cultures, and in logic" (Herrick, 1971, p. 110). In the social studies, Herrick noted, "such centers as great people, great documents, cities, states, or countries are commonly used as organizing centers, but they have limited mobility. It is hard to move Madison, Wisconsin, anywhere else" (pp. 110-111). His examples of mobile organizing centers included "social functions, common geographic characteristics, or the common and persistent problems of living" (p. 111). Herrick advanced the thesis that in addition to providing greater continuity, the latter organizing centers accommodate individual differences more readily, which is another precept of progressive education, since their mobility can provide "room and opportunity for encompassing meaningfully differences in children's background, ability and development" (p. 111).

Herrick (1971) also pointed out that teachers tend not to think in terms of these kinds of organizing centers when planning curriculum. Citing a study by Nerbovig (1956), Herrick (1971) explained that teachers commonly talked about teaching "addition, the farm, electricity, and the seven basic food groups" (p. 109), rather than planning around important understandings as objectives. Indeed, my experience has been that a preservice teacher candidate will tell me that he or she has to teach a unit on spiders in their cooperating classroom. When I ask, "Well, what are some important understandings you want your students to attain about spiders?", as a prompt to generate a theme, he or she has difficulty doing so. It is much harder to think in terms of themes than topics, and I believe it requires far more sophisticated content knowledge than teaching to topics.

In closing this discussion of themes, topics, and the principle of continuity, two points merit examination. First, this discussion of the principle of continuity has mainly focused on mastery of subject matter. Recently, however, critical theorists have pointed out that our capacity to think, our very consciousness, is shaped by the fragmentation found in traditional schools. For example, in arguably his best work, Jonathan Kozol (1975) wrote:

> Prior to the classroom, outside the school, most things flow into each other, one thing blends into another; many things certainly at any single moment are residing simultaneously within a child's mind. Suddenly in kindergarten, then more clearly in the First and Second grades, the day begins to lose its complex wholeness and turns into separate items known as "periods." Imagination, diffuse as in reality it is, begins to be divided into items known as "subject matter." Intellect itself gets split up two ways into "reason" and "emotion." The day and the week and the season and the year are turned into two items known as "school" and "real world"; and the future is transformed into twelve evenly divided, but distinct and isolable, items known as "school years"—separated by invisible connectives called "promotions." (pp. 27-28)

Similarly, he observed that "words like 'division,' 'period,' 'section,' 'unit,' 'grade,' 'assignment,' 'chapter,' 'topic,' and 'sub-topic,' 'term,' 'semester,' 'credit-hour,' 'area of concentration' are far more common in the public schools than words that speak of continuity or wholeness" (p. 28). Kozol (1975) argued that our minds are socialized by this fragmentation to not make inferences or seek relationships between phenomena. There are, in Kozol's terms, merely "no connections." The fragmentation of the

curriculum and the school day have profound political ramifications that extend well beyond the school door to the extent that we are "stupefied" by them (Macedo, 1993) and therefore unable to engage in an objective analysis of our social reality.

Finally, I have struggled as a teacher educator to promote the exploitation of the principle of continuity through my efforts to teach the distinction between topic and theme advanced in this paper. I have tried to define "theme" and "topic" and then use flash cards with my examples of each written on them in an effort to help my students attain these concepts. Holding a card displaying "The Civil War," I will ask the class "theme" or "topic?" Clearly, the distinction is not always readily drawn. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the thematic treatment of subject matter promises to better exploit the principle of continuity in the pursuit of educative experience than topical treatment and that teacher educators and teachers should strive to have their content as continuous as possible for the reasons outlined above. The remainder of this paper will turn to the processes and goals of project work with a consideration of Dewey's concept of purpose.

The Formation of Purposes: The Process and Goal of Project Work

A second pitfall in project design has to do with the processes and goals of project work. Again, all too often, weak goals and processes, or the absence of goals altogether, characterize project design. The consequence of weak processes or the absence of aims is that the curriculum activity fails to cultivate the kind of intelligence Dewey saw as key to democratic schooling. Dewey argued that progressive schools should aim at the cultivation of purposes, which are reflective goals and the plans and activities to execute them. Purposes, for Dewey, are fundamental to democratic citizenship because the capacity to collectively transform naive desires into reflective goal-directed activity is precisely what is required of a free people. He recalled Plato's definition of a slave as someone who carries out the purposes of others but added that the individual who lives by whim is "equally directed by forces over which he has no command" (p. 76). During the rise of progressive education, advocates of the project method spoke of projects as "whole-hearted purposeful activity," (see Kilpatrick, 1925, p. 349) and promoted a curriculum composed of sequential purposes. What follows is a closer examination of the concept of purpose and its significance for designing project work.

The complex intellectual process of constructing a purpose starts with an impulse. For Dewey (1938), there was no sounder principle of progressive education "than its emphasis upon the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities" (p. 77). Children and adults have many impulses. When any impulse is initially blocked, the obstructed impulse becomes a desire. Parents and teachers are all too familiar with this phase in the formation of a purpose. The child sees a commercial on television for a toy; the parent says "no." The impulse is frustrated. If the impulse is relatively fleeting, the child may forget about the toy; however, if the impulse is strong, it may spur thinking about how the toy can be obtained. The difference between an impulse or desire and a purpose is the intervening process of reflective thought:

> A purpose is an end-view. That is, it involves foresight of the consequences which will result from acting on impulse. . . . It demands, in the first place, observation of objective conditions and circumstances. For impulse and desire produce consequences not by themselves alone but through their interaction or co-operation with surrounding conditions. . . . As in the sign by a railway crossing, we have to stop, look, listen. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 78-79)

This idea of stopping, of inhibiting impulse for the sake of observation and judgment, is a manifestation

of the power of self-control. Dewey (1938) called the creation of this power the "ideal aim of education," since it stands opposed to acting capriciously:

> The alternative to externally imposed inhibition is inhibition through an individual's own reflection and judgment. The old phrase "stop and think" is sound psychology. For thinking is stoppage of the immediate manifestation of impulse until that impulse has been brought into connection with other possible tendencies to action so that a more comprehensive and coherent plan of action is formed. (p. 74)

But this stopping and careful observation of objective conditions is not enough. There has to be an understanding of the consequences of acting in a particular way. In familiar situations, Dewey explained, we so closely associate acting a certain way with a consequence that we do not have to recall at great length our prior experiences. In new or uncertain situations, however, we have to stop and think more carefully in order to form a judgment as to what to do. Thus, the formation of a purpose involves three phases:

> It involves (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (Dewey, 1938, p. 80)

In sum, formation of purpose starts with an impulse, a desire, and involves the development of a blueprint for attaining an aim based on foresight of its consequences. Desire forms the "moving springs of action" (Dewey, 1938, p. 82), but ultimately without an objective analysis of conditions, without inquiry, no successful plan can be formulated. According to Dewey, the desire will remain merely a wish.

Dewey's emphasis on the distinction between desire and purpose is an explicit criticism of romantic strains of progressive education that, in his view, made the error of identifying purposeful activity with mere activity. As an example of the latter, I recently observed a first-grade teacher engage her students in a project on water. Her students took a variety of objects, predicted whether or not those objects would sink or float in a water table, dropped them in the water, and then recorded observations on a sheet of paper. The discernment of patterns, the attempt to generate a rule regarding sinking or floating, or some other larger aim, were all missing. The students were busy, but this activity did not require the planning, the "stopping and thinking," and the examination of means and ends that would constitute reflective thinking. In contrast, purposeful activity by definition is *intelligent* activity:

> Intelligent activity is distinguished from aimless activity by the fact that it involves selection of means—analysis—out of the variety of conditions that are present, and their arrangement—synthesis—to reach an intended aim or purpose. That the more immature the learner is, the simpler must be the ends held in view and the more rudimentary the means employed is obvious. But the principle of organization of activity in terms of some perception of the relation of consequences to means applies even with the very young. Otherwise an activity ceases to be educative because it is blind. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 105-106)

This principle, applied to a project curriculum, means that projects must start with a heartfelt desire on the part of the children and must include the processes of observation, gathering information, analysis, and synthesis in the formation of a plan of action toward some goal, which itself is open to revision. The sink-and-float activity described above violates this principle of organization of activity because it does not engage the children in the arrangement and study of means and consequences to goals. Like other curriculum activities that give emphasis to process alone, it is directionless and misses an opportunity to cultivate reflective thinking. An emphasis on process without an eye to an end view is busyness; an emphasis on goals without careful study of how to attain them means the goals will remain illusive.

In his influential work on the project method first published in 1923, Collings advanced several important criteria related to the selection of purposes. First, he asked, "Does the proposed purpose *genuinely grip* boys and girls?" (Collings, 1993, p. 179). Is the element of whole-heartedness present? Second, Collings proposed, "Does the proposed purpose lend itself to *successful* realization on the part of boys and girls?" (p. 179). Is it within the reach of the students, given their current level of mastery and skill? Is it practical, given the resources? Finally, he wrote, "Does the proposed purpose prospectively lead to *other and different* lines of purposes in the process of its realization?" (p. 180). Here again is the idea articulated in the previous section of this paper: does the purpose carry over to other lines of inquiry? In Collings' view, if a proposed project meets these three criteria, then the teacher and students can move to the process of planning and executing the project. Dewey (1938) pointed out that educational growth depends on the presence of difficulty. The purpose has to pose some challenge, but the problem must be tractable. One important aspect of the project method that Collings emphasized is the idea of debriefing the project upon completion. Assessing the product and reviewing the adequacy of the plans either as a group or individually constitutes a vital phase of project method and indicates how important it is for projects to have goals. Kilpatrick (1936) asserted the importance of reviewing the project itself—and particularly the quality of the thinking that went into a project—when he wrote that an important objective of the method was "*ever better acting* on thinking, ever better thinking to tell how to act, what to do; ever closer study of the results of the acting so as to test and correct and improve thinking" (p. 115).

It should be clear from this discussion that for Dewey, the point of progressive pedagogy was to develop the capacity to engage in purposeful behavior—and that purposes entail reflective thinking processes aimed at the examination and attainment of goals. For him, the absence of goals signified directionless activity, "which leads to identification of freedom with immediate execution of impulses and desires" (Dewey, 1938, p. 81). On the other hand, the attainment of goals requires complex intellectual operations that must be honed. Both product and process are integrally necessary to the conduct of intelligent activity and the cultivation of freedom: "freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences that will result from action upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation" (Dewey, 1938, p. 74). Democracy requires that all children have the opportunity to form purposes through reflective thinking.

Discussion

A look at Dewey's theoretical analysis of progressive education suggests that subject matter content, processes, and products (end views) are all vital to intelligent activity. To the extent that projects aim at the cultivation of intelligence, they should reflect the principles discussed above. In early childhood education, it is common for processes to be given emphasis in part as a reaction to the product orientation of the elementary curriculum. As fallacious as the primary grades' emphasis on end results is, it is equally erroneous to downplay the importance of goals and products in the education of young children. All children need the guidance and care of their teachers in the cultivation of the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to form good goals and the plans to attain them (Dewey, 1938). Teachers' assisting children in the formation of purposes, as Dewey pointed out, serves the child's freedom rather than abridges it.

Another implication of this paper is the fundamental role the philosophical foundations of education play in the development of curriculum for young children. Most teacher candidates take, at most, a survey course or two in the social foundations. Increasingly, these courses are taught by adjunct faculty or individuals without a degree in the field. The psychological foundations, instead, are the dominant

source of foundational knowledge for curriculum in elementary and early childhood education. While the psychological foundations are fundamental and support the romantic emphasis on child growth shared by many teachers of young children, Dewey would point out that the psychological foundations cannot provide normative conceptions of education; they cannot offer visions of what ought to be. For teachers to have purposes, too, in the sense that Dewey discussed them above, requires much more rigorous work in the preservice curriculum in the social foundations (the study of the objective conditions of schooling) and philosophy of education (the study of normative conceptions of education).

Finally, the implementation of progressive pedagogy is very difficult. No one said it would be easy, particularly in the context of today's *zeitgeist* of testing and standards. Our current educational leaders hardly conceive of the schools as a context for the kind of democratic living that Dewey and others advocated in the first half of the 20th century. But the consequence of not struggling along these lines is, as Dewey suggested, to be controlled by forces that will remain a source of mystification to us.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks James Raths, Sue Vartuli, and Amy Sussna for their assistance with this paper.

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